CHAPTER 2

Classical Theories I

Emile Durkheim: From Mechanical to Organic Solidarity
Karl Marx: From Capitalism to Communism
Max Weber: The Rationalization of Society
Summary
Suggested Readings

The early giants of social theory are noted for the creation of grand theories, theories that, as defined in Chapter 1, are vast, highly ambitious theoretical efforts to tell the story of great stretches of social history and large expanses of the social world. These theories of history generally culminate in the author's time with a description of a society that, while it has made progress, is beset with problems. The creators of such theories usually offer ideas about how to solve those problems and thereby to create a better society.

EMILE DURKHEIM: FROM MECHANICAL TO ORGANIC SOLIDARITY

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) built on the work of the French social theorist Auguste Comte, but he became a far more important figure in the history of theory than Comte. In fact, at least some observers consider him *the* most important theorist in the history of sociology. To this day, many forms of sociological theorizing bear the stamp of Durkheim's thinking.

Two Types of Solidarity

Durkheim's grand theory involves a concern for the historical transformation from more primitive mechanical societies to more modern organic societies. What differentiates these two types of society is the source of their solidarity, or what holds them together. The key here is the division of labor.

In **mechanical solidarity,** society is held together by the fact that virtually everyone does essentially the same things (gathering fruits and vegetables, hunting animals). In other words, there is little division of labor in primitive society and this fact holds society together. However, in more modern **organic solidarity** a substantial division of labor has occurred and people come to perform increasingly specialized tasks. Thus, some may make shoes, others may bake bread, and still others may raise children. Solidarity here comes from differences; that is, people need the contributions of an increasing number of people in order to function and even to survive.

Thus, Durkheim envisioned a historical transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity. This idea is clearly different from Comte's model of the change. Comte thought in terms of changes in ideas, in the way people seek to explain what transpires in the world; Durkheim dealt with changes in the material world in the way in which we divide up and do our work.

Changes in Dynamic Density

What causes the change from mechanical to organic solidarity? Durkheim's answer is that an increase in the **dynamic density** of society causes the transformation. There are two components of dynamic density. The first is simply the sheer number of people in society. However, an increased number of people is not enough to induce a change in the division of labor because individuals and small groups of people can live in relative isolation from one another and continue to be jacks of all trades. That is, even in societies with a large population, each individual can continue to do most of the required tasks. Thus, a second factor is important in order for dynamic density to increase and lead to changes in the division of labor: there must be an increase in the amount of interaction that takes place among the greater number of people in society. When an increasingly large number of people interact with greater frequency with one another, dynamic density is likely to increase to the point that a transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity occurs.

What is it about the increase in dynamic density that leads to the need for a different division of labor? With more people, there is greater competition over the use of scarce resources such as land, game, and fruits and vegetables. If everyone competes for everything, there is great disorder and conflict. With

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mechanical solidarity In Durkheimian theory, the idea that primitive society is held together by the fact there is little division of labor and, as a result, virtually everyone does essentially the same things.

organic solidarity To Durkheim, the idea that because of the substantial division of labor in modern society, solidarity comes from differences; that is, people need the contributions of an increasing number of people in order to function and even to survive.

dynamic density The number of people and their frequency of interaction. An increase in dynamic density leads to the transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)

A Biographical Vignette

Durkheim is most often thought of today as a political conservative, and his influence within sociology certainly has been a conservative one. But in his time, he was considered a liberal. This was exemplified by the active public role he played in the defense of Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish army captain whose court-martial for treason was felt by many to be based on anti-Semitic sentiments in some sectors of French society.

Durkheim was deeply offended by the Dreyfus affair, particularly its anti-Semitism. But Durkheim did not attribute this anti-Semitism to racism among the French people. Characteristically, he saw it as a symptom of the moral sickness confronting French society as a whole. He said:

> When society undergoes suffering, it feels the need to find someone whom it can hold responsible for its sickness, on whom it can avenge its misfortunes; and those against whom public opinion already discriminates are naturally designated for this role. These are the pariahs who serve as expiatory victims. What confirms me in this interpretation is the way in which the result of Dreyfus's trial was greeted in 1894. There was a surge of joy in the boulevards. People celebrated as a triumph what should have been a cause for public mourning. At least they knew whom to blame for the economic troubles and moral distress in which they lived. The trouble came from the Jews. The charge had been officially proved. By this very fact alone, things already seemed to be getting better and people felt consoled.

Thus, Durkheim's interest in the Dreyfus affair stemmed from his deep and lifelong interest in morality and the moral crisis confronting modern society.

To Durkheim, the answer to the Dreyfus affair and crises like it lay in ending the moral disorder in society. Because that could not be done quickly or easily, Durkheim suggested more specific actions such as severe repression of those who incite hatred of others and government efforts to show the public how it is being misled. He urged people to "have the courage to proclaim aloud what they think, and to unite together in order to achieve victory in the struggle against public madness."

an increased division of labor in which some people are responsible for one of these things and other people responsible for other things, there is likely to be less conflict and more harmony. Perhaps more importantly, greater specialization in performing specific tasks makes for greater efficiency and ultimately greater productivity. Thus, there will be more of everything for an expanding population with an increased division of labor. Greater peace and prosperity are the result of the increased division of labor, or at least that is what Durkheim contended.

Collective Conscience

Another important aspect of Durkheim's argument about the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity is that it is accompanied by a dramatic change

in what he called the **collective conscience.** These are the ideas shared by the members of a group, a tribe, or a society. They are collective in the sense that no one individual knows or possesses all of these ideas; it is only the entire collection of individuals that knows and possesses all of them. The collective conscience in mechanical solidarity is very different from that in organic solidarity.

In mechanical solidarity and the small, undifferentiated societies associated with it, the collective conscience affects everyone and is of great significance to them. People care deeply about collective ideas. Furthermore, the ideas are very powerful and people are likely to act in accord with them. They are also quite rigid and they tend to be associated with religion.

In organic solidarity and the large, differentiated societies linked with it, fewer people are affected by the collective conscience. In other words, more people are able to evade it partially or completely. The collective conscience is not as important and most people don't seem to care about it so deeply. It is far weaker and does not exercise nearly as much control over people. The collective conscience is far more flexible and adaptable and less associated with anything we think of as religion.

For example, in primitive society with mechanical solidarity people might feel very deeply about being involved in tribal activities, including the selection of a new chief. If one member does not participate, everyone will know and difficulties will arise for that person in the tribe. However, in modern society characterized by organic solidarity, the feeling about such political participation (e.g., voting) is not nearly as strong. People are urged to vote, but there is not very much strength of conviction involved, and in any case the fact that some did not vote is likely to escape the view of their neighbors.

Law: Repressive and Restitutive

How do we know whether there has been a transition from mechanical to organic solidarity? From a strong to a weak collective conscience? Durkheim argued that we can observe these changes in a transformation in the law. Mechanical solidarity tends to be characterized by **repressive law.** This is a form of law in which offenders are likely to be severely punished for any action that is seen by the tightly integrated community as an offense against the then-powerful collective conscience. The theft of a pig might lead to cutting off the hands of the thief. Blaspheming against the community's god or gods might result in the removal of the blasphemer's tongue. Because people are

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collective conscience The ideas shared by the members of a collectivity such as a group, a tribe, or a society.

repressive law Characteristic of mechanical solidarity, this is a form of law in which offenders are likely to be severely punished for any action that is seen by the tightly integrated community as an offense against the powerful collective conscience.

so involved in the moral system, an offense against it is likely to be met with swift, severe punishment. These reactions are evidence that repressive law is in place and such law is, in turn, a material reflection of the existence of a strong collective conscience and a society held together by mechanical solidarity.

As we have seen, over time mechanical solidarity gives way to organic solidarity and a progressive weakening of the collective conscience. The indicator of a weak collective conscience, of the existence of organic solidarity, is **restitutive law.** Instead of being severely punished for even seemingly minor offenses against the collective morality, individuals in this more modern type of society are likely simply to be asked to comply with the law or to repay (make restitution to) those who have been harmed by their actions. Thus, one who steals a pig might be required to work for 100 hours on the farm from which the pig was stolen, pay a fine, or repay society by spending a brief period of time in jail. This is obviously a far milder reaction than having one's hands cut off for such an offense. The reason is that the collectivity is not deeply and emotionally invested in the common morality ("thou shalt not steal") that stands behind such a law. Rather, officials (the police, court officers) are delegated the legal responsibility to be sure the law and, ultimately, the morality are enforced. The collectivity can distance itself from the whole thing with the knowledge that it is being handled by paid and/or elected officials.

More extremely, something like blaspheming against God is likely to go unnoticed and unpunished in modern societies. Having a far weaker collective conscience, believing little in religion, people in general are likely to react weakly or not all to a blasphemer. And officials, busy with far greater problems such as drug abuse, rape, and murder, are unlikely to pay any attention at all to blasphemy, even if there are laws against it.

Anomie

At one level Durkheim seems to be describing and explaining a historical change from one type of solidarity to another. The two types of solidarity merely seem to be different and one does not seem to be any better or worse than the other. Although mechanical solidarity is not problem free, the problems associated with organic solidarity and how they might be solved concern Durkheim. Several problems come into existence with organic solidarity, but the one that worries Durkheim most is what he termed *anomie.* Durkheim viewed anomie (and other problems) as a pathology, which implies that it can be cured. In other words, a social theorist like Durkheim was akin to a medical doctor, diagnosing social pathologies and dispensing cures.

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restitutive law Characteristic of organic solidarity and its weakened collective conscience. In this form of law offenders are likely simply to be asked to comply with the law or to repay (make restitution to) those who have been harmed by their actions.

Key Concept
Social Facts

Crucial to understanding Durkheim's thinking and the development of modern sociology is his concept of **social facts.** He developed this idea because he was struggling to separate the then-new discipline of sociology from the existing fields of psychology and philosophy. While philosophers thought about abstractions, Durkheim argued that sociologists should treat social facts as things. As such, social facts were to be studied empirically; this practice distinguished sociologists from philosophers who merely speculated about abstract issues without venturing into the real world and collecting data on concrete social phenomena.

Durkheim also argued that social facts were external to, and coercive over, individuals. This served to distinguish them from the things that psychologists studied. Psychologists were concerned with psychological facts that were internal to individuals (*not* external) and were not necessarily coercive over them.

Durkheim also distinguished between two types of social facts. The first is **material social facts.** These are social facts that are materialized in the external social world. An example is the structure of the classroom in which you are taking the course for which you are reading this book. It is a material reality (you can touch and feel the walls, desks, blackboard) and it is external to you and coercive over you. In terms of the latter, the structure of the room may encourage listening to, and taking notes on, lectures. It also serves to prevent you from, say, playing baseball in the room while a lecture is in process.

Anomie may be defined as a sense of not knowing what one is expected to do. This is traceable to the decline in the collective conscience in organic solidarity. There are few, if any, clear, strong collective ideas about things. As a result, confronted with many issues—should I take that pig that is wandering in the field? Should I blaspheme against god?—people simply do not know what they are supposed to do. More generally, people are adrift in society and lack clear and secure moorings. This contrasts strongly with mechanical solidarity, in which everyone is very clear about what the collectivity believes and what they are supposed to do in any given situation. They have clear and secure moorings; they do *not* suffer from anomie.

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social facts To Durkheim, social facts are the subject matter of sociology. They are to be treated as things that are external to, and coercive over, individuals and they are to be studied empirically.

material social facts Social facts that take a material form in the external social world (e.g., architecture).

anomie A sense, associated with organic solidarity, of not knowing what one is expected to do; of being adrift in society without any clear and secure moorings.

Key Concept—Continued

The second is **nonmaterial social facts.** These are social facts that are also external and coercive, but which do not take a material form; they are nonmaterial. The major examples of nonmaterial social facts in sociology are norms and values. Thus, we are also prevented from playing baseball while a lecture is in progress because of unwritten and widely shared rules about how one is supposed to behave in class. Furthermore, we have learned to put a high value on education, with the result that we are very reluctant to do anything that would adversely affect it.

But, although we can see how a nonmaterial social fact is coercive over us, in what sense is it also external to us? The answer is that the things like the norms and values of society are the shared possession of the collectivity. Some, perhaps most, of them are internalized in the individual during the socialization process, but no single individual possesses anything approaching all of them. The entire set of norms and values is in the sole possession of the collectivity. In this sense we can say they are external to us.

To this day, many sociologists concentrate their attention on social facts. However, we rarely use this now-antiquated term today. Rather, sociologists focus on social structures (material social facts) and social institutions (nonmaterial social facts). However, it has become clear that in his effort to distinguish sociology from psychology and philosophy, Durkheim came up with a much too limited definition of the subject matter of sociology. As we will see, many sociologists study an array of phenomena that would not be considered Durkheimian social facts.

KARL MARX: FROM CAPITALISM TO COMMUNISM

The most important and esthetically pleasing (because analyses, conclusions, and remedies for society's ills stem seamlessly from basic premises) theory of the classical age is that of the German social thinker and political activist, Karl Marx (1818–1883). This assertion might come as a surprise to the reader who may have previously come in contact only with critical statements about Marx and his thinking. In the popular view, Marx is seen as some sort of crazed radical who developed a set of ideas that led many nations, especially the then–Soviet Union, in the direction of disastrous communist regimes. Almost all such regimes have failed or are gradually being transformed into more capitalistic societies. The failure of those societies and the abuses associated with them (e.g., the system of prison camps in the Soviet Union—the Gulag Archipelago—where millions died) have been blamed on Marx and his crazed

nonmaterial social facts Social facts that are external and coercive, but which do not take a material form; they are nonmaterial (e.g., norms and values).

Key Concept

Anomic (and Other Types of) Suicide

The concept of anomie played a central role in Durkheim's famous work, *Suicide.* He argued that people are more likely to kill themselves when they do not know what is expected of them. In this situation, regulation of people is low and they are largely free to run wild. This mad pursuit of anything and everything is likely to prove unsatisfying and, as a result, a higher percentage of people in such a situation are apt to commit suicide, specifically **anomic suicide.**

But what causes the rate of anomic suicide to increase? Social disruption is the main cause, but interestingly, we can see an increase in the rate of such suicide in times of both positive and negative disruption. That is, both an economic boom and economic depression can cause a rise in the rate of anomic suicide. Either positive or negative disruptions can adversely affect the ability of the collectivity to exercise control over the individual. Without such control, people are more likely to feel rootless; to not know what they are supposed to do in the changing and increasingly strange environment. The unease that this causes leads people to commit anomic suicide at a higher rate than in more stable times.

Interestingly, anomic suicide is just one of four types of suicide created by Durkheim in a broad-ranging theory of this behavior. The others are **egoistic suicide,** which occurs when people are not well integrated into the collectivity. Largely on their own, they feel a sense of futility, meaninglessness, and more of them adopt the view that they are free (morally and otherwise) to choose to do anything, including kill themselves. In **altruistic suicide,** people are too well integrated into the collectivity and kill themselves in greater numbers because the group leads them, or even forces them, to commit suicide more frequently than they otherwise would. Finally, **fatalistic suicide** occurs in situations of excessive regulation (e.g., slavery) where people are so distressed and depressed by their lack of freedom that they take their own lives more frequently than otherwise.

Thus, Durkheim offers a broad theory of suicide based on the degree to which people are regulated by, or integrated in, the collectivity.

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anomic suicide People are more likely to kill themselves when they do not know what is expected of them, where regulation is low, and they are largely free to run wild. This mad pursuit is likely to prove unsatisfying and, as a result, a higher percentage of people in such a situation are apt to commit this type of suicide.

egoistic suicide When people are not well integrated into the collectivity and largely on their own, they feel a sense of futility, meaninglessness, and more of them feel that they are morally free to kill themselves.

altruistic suicide When people are too well integrated into the collectivity, they are likely to kill themselves in greater numbers because the group leads them, or even forces them, to.

fatalistic suicide In situations of excessive regulation (e.g., slavery) people are often so distressed and depressed by their lack of freedom that they take their own lives more frequently than otherwise.

ideas. But while the leaders of those societies invoked Marx's name and called themselves communists, the kind of societies they created would have been attacked by Marx himself for their inhumanity. The fact is that what those societies became had little in common with what Marx would have liked a communist society to be.

Human Potential

The starting point for Marx's grand theory is a set of assumptions about the potential of people in the right historical and social circumstances. In capitalistic and precapitalistic societies, people had come nowhere close to their human potential. In precapitalist societies (say, the Stone Age or the Middle Ages), people were too busy scrambling to find adequate food, shelter, and protection to develop their higher capacities. Although food, shelter, and protection were easier to come by for most people in a capitalistic society, the oppressive and exploitative nature of that system made it impossible for most people to come anywhere close to their potential.

To Marx, people, unlike lower animals, are endowed with consciousness and the ability to link that consciousness to action. Among other things, people can set themselves apart from what they are doing, plan what they are going to do, choose to act or not to act, choose a specific kind of action, be flexible if impediments get in their way, concentrate on what they are doing for long periods, and often choose to do what they are doing in concert with other people. But people do not just think; they would perish if that was all they did. They must act and often that action involves acting on nature to appropriate from it what is needed (raw materials, water, food, shelter) to survive. People appropriated things in earlier societies, but they did it so primitively and inefficiently that they were unable to develop their capacities, especially their capacities to think, to any great degree. Under capitalism, people came to care little about expressing their creative capacities in the act of appropriating nature. Rather, they focused on owning things and earning enough money to acquire those things. But capitalism was important to Marx because it provided the technological and organizational innovations needed for the creation of a communist society, where, for the first time, people would be able to express their full capacities. Under communism, people were freed from the desire merely to own things and would be able, with the help of technologies and organizations created in capitalism, to live up to their full human potential (what Marx called "species being").

Alienation

The idea that people must appropriate what they need from nature is related to the view that people, in Marx's view, need to work. Work is a positive process in which people use their creative capacities, and further extend them, in productive activities. However, the work that most people did under capitalism

did not permit them to express their human potential. In other words, rather than expressing themselves in their work, people under capitalism were alienated from it.

One cannot understand what Marx meant by alienation without understanding further what he meant by human potential. In the circumstance (communism) where people achieve their human potential there is a natural interconnection between people and their productive activities, the products they produce, the fellow workers with whom they produce those things, and with what they are potentially capable of becoming. **Alienation** is the breakdown of these natural interconnections. Instead of being naturally related to all of these things, people are separated from them.

So, under capitalism, instead of choosing their productive activities, people have their activities chosen for them by the owners, the capitalists. The capitalists decide what is to be done and how it is to be done. They offer the workers (in Marx's terminology, the "proletariat") a wage and if the workers accept, they must perform the activities the way they have been designed to be performed by the capitalist. In return, they receive a wage that is supposed to provide them with all the satisfaction and gratification they need. The productive activities are controlled, even owned, by the capitalist. Thus, the workers are separated from them and unable to express themselves in them.

Second, capitalists also own the products. The workers do not choose what to produce; when the products are completed they do not belong to the workers, and the products are unlikely to be used by the workers to satisfy their basic needs. Instead, the products belong to the capitalists, who may use them, or seek to have them used, in any way they wish. Given the profit orientation that serves to define capitalism, this almost always means that they will endeavor to sell the products for a profit. Once they've made the products, the workers are completely separated from them and have absolutely no say in what happens to them. Furthermore, the workers may have very little sense of their contribution to the final product. They work on an assembly line and perform a very specific task (e.g., tightening some bolts) and may have little idea what is being produced and how what they are doing fits into the overall process and contributes to the end product.

Third, the workers are likely to be separated from their fellow workers. In Marx's view, people are inherently social and, left to their own devices, would choose to work collaboratively and cooperatively to produce what is needed to live. However, under capitalism, workers, even when they are surrounded by many other people, perform their tasks alone and repetitively. Those around them are likely to be strangers who are performing similarly isolated tasks. Often it is even worse than this: The capitalist frequently pits workers against

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alienation The breakdown of, the separation from, the natural interconnection between people and their productive activities, the products they produce, the fellow workers with whom they produce those things, and with what they are potentially capable of becoming.

each other to see who can produce the most for the least amount of pay. Those who succeed keep their jobs, at least for a time, while those who fail are likely to find themselves unemployed and on the street. Thus, instead of working together harmoniously, workers are pitted against one another in a life-and-death struggle for survival. Even if they are not engaged in a life-and-death struggle with one another, it is clear that workers in capitalism are separated from one another.

Finally, instead of expressing their human potential in their work, people are driven further and further from what they have the potential to be. They perform less and less like humans and are reduced to animals, beasts of burden, or inhuman machines. Consciousness is numbed and ultimately destroyed as relations with other humans and with nature are progressively severed. The result is a mass of people who are unable to express their essential human qualities, a mass of alienated workers.

Capitalism

Alienation occurs within the context of a capitalist society. As we have seen, **capitalism** is essentially a two-class system composed of capitalists and the proletariat, in which one class (capitalists) exploits the other (proletariat). The key to understanding both classes lies in what Marx called the **means of production.** As the name suggests, these are the things that are needed for production to take place. Included in the means of production are such things as tools, machinery, raw materials, and factories. Under capitalism the **capitalists** own the means of production. If the **proletariat** want to work, they must come to the capitalist, who owns the means that make most work possible. Workers need access to the means of production in order to work. They also need money in order to survive in capitalism, and the capitalists tend to have that too, as well as the ability to make more of it. The capitalists have what the proletariat needs (the means of production, money for wages), but what do the workers have to offer in return? The workers have something absolutely essential to the capitalist—labor and the time available to perform it. The capitalist cannot produce and cannot make more money and profit without the labor of the proletariat. Thus, a deal is struck. The capitalist allows the proletariat access to the means of production, and the proletariat are paid a wage (albeit a small

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capitalism An economic system composed mainly of capitalists and the proletariat, in which one class (capitalists) exploits the other (proletariat).

means of production Those things that are needed for production to take place (including tools, machinery, raw materials, and factories).

capitalists Those who own the means of production under capitalism and are therefore in a position to exploit workers.

proletariat Those who, because they do not own means of production, must sell their labor time to the capitalists in order to get access to those means.

Karl Marx (1818–1883)
A Biographical Vignette

After graduation from the University of Berlin, Marx became a writer for a liberal-radical newspaper and within ten months had become its editor-in-chief. However, because of its political positions, the paper was closed shortly thereafter by the government. The early essays published in this period began to reflect a number of the positions that would guide Marx throughout his life. They were liberally sprinkled with democratic principles, humanism, and youthful idealism. He rejected the abstractness of philosophy, the naive dreaming of utopian communists, and those activists who were urging what he considered to be premature political action. In rejecting these activists, Marx laid the groundwork for his own life's work:

> Practical attempts, even by the masses, can be answered with a cannon as soon as they become dangerous, but ideas that have overcome our intellect and conquered our conviction, ideas to which reason has riveted our conscience, are chains from which one cannot break loose without breaking one's heart; they are demons that one can only overcome by submitting to them.

one, as small as the capitalist can possibly get away with). Actually the worker is paid what Marx called a **subsistence wage,** just enough for the worker to survive and to have a family and children so that when the worker falters, he can be replaced by one of his children. In exchange, the proletariat give the capitalist their labor time and all the productive abilities and capacities associated with that time.

On the surface, this seems like a fair deal: Both the capitalist and the proletariat get what they lack and what they need. However, in Marx's view this is a grossly unfair situation. Why is that so? It is traceable to another of Marx's famous ideas, the **labor theory of value.** As the words suggest, his idea is that *all* value comes from labor. The proletariat labor; the capitalist does not. The capitalist might invest, plan, manage, scheme, and so on, but to Marx this is not labor. Marx's sense of labor is the production of things out of the raw materials provided by nature. The proletariat and only the proletariat do that, although under capitalism the raw materials are provided by the capitalists and not directly by nature. To put it baldly, since the proletariat labor and the capitalists do not, the proletariat deserve virtually everything; the capitalists, almost nothing.

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subsistence wage The wage paid by the capitalist to the proletariat that is just enough for the worker to survive and to have a family and children so that when the worker falters, he can be replaced by one of his children.

labor theory of value Marx's theory that *all* value comes from labor and is therefore traceable, in capitalism, to the proletariat.

Key Concept
Exploitation

To Marx, capitalism, by its very nature, leads to exploitation, particularly of the proletariat, or working class. His thinking on exploitation is derived from his labor theory of value, and more specifically the concept of **surplus value,** defined as the difference between the value of a product when it is sold and the value of the elements (including worker's labor) consumed in the production of the product. Surplus value, like all value from the perspective of the labor theory of value, comes from the worker. It should go to the worker, but in the capitalist system the lion's share of it goes to the capitalist. The degree to which the capitalist retains surplus value and uses it to his own ends (including, and especially, expansion of his capitalist business) is the degree to which capitalism is an exploitative system. In a colorful metaphor, Marx describes capitalists as "vampires" who suck the labor of the proletariat. Furthermore, the more of proletariat's "blood" the capitalist sucks, the bigger, more successful, and wealthier he will become. In capitalism, the deserving (the proletariat) grow poorer, while the undeserving (the capitalist) grow immensely wealthy.

Of course, the situation in a capitalistic society is exactly the reverse: The capitalists get the lion's share of the rewards and the workers get barely enough to subsist. Thus (and this was another of Marx's famous concepts), the proletariat are the victims of **exploitation.** Ironically, neither capitalist nor worker is conscious of this exploitation. They are both the victims of **false consciousness.** The workers think they are getting a fair day's pay. The capitalists think that they are being rewarded, not because of their exploitation of the workers, but for their cleverness, their capital investment, their manipulation of the market, and so on. The capitalists are too busy making more money, in money grubbing, ever to get a true understanding of the exploitative nature of their relationship with workers. However, the proletariat do have the capacity to achieve such an understanding, partly because eventually they are so exploited and impoverished that there is nothing to hide the reality of what is

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surplus value The difference between the value of a product when it is sold and the value of the elements consumed in production of the product (including worker's labor).

exploitation In capitalism, the capitalists get the lion's share of the rewards and the proletariat get enough to subsist even though, based on the labor theory of value, the situation should be reversed.

false consciousness In capitalism, both the proletariat and the capitalists have an inaccurate sense of themselves, their relationship to one another, and the way in which capitalism operates.

Contemporary Applications

Does Marx's Theory Have Any Relevance to a Post-Communist World?

There are those who felt that when the Soviet Union and its allies began to fall in the late 1980s that not only had communism failed, but that Marx's theory, on which that system was ostensibly based, would finally, and once and for all, be relegated to the dustbin of disproven and dishonored theories. Indeed, in the early 1990s there was much talk of the end of Marxian theory. Yet, Marx's theory, as well as the many neo-Marxian theories that are derived from it, not only survive in the early 21st century, but there are those who argue that they are more relevant and useful than ever.

The fact is that Marx did little or no theorizing about communism. Rather, he was a theorist of capitalism and it is clear that with the demise of Soviet communism (and the transformation of Chinese communism into a very vibrant capitalist economy coexisting with a communist state), capitalism is freer than it has been in nearly 100 years (since the birth of Soviet communism in 1917), if not in its entire history, to roam the world and intrude itself into every nook and cranny of that world.

From 1917 to 1989 the expansion of capitalism was limited by communism in various ways. First, many countries in the world, including some of the biggest and most important, were communist or were allied with the communist bloc. As a result, capitalist businesses found it impossible to establish, or at least had great difficulty establishing themselves in those parts of the world. Second, the global conflict between capitalism and communism, especially the Cold War that began shortly after the close of World War II, inhibited the development and global spread of capitalism. For one thing, the huge expenditure on the military, and on military flare-ups associated with those periods in which the Cold War heated up considerably (e.g., the Korean and Vietnamese wars), sapped resources that could have been devoted to the expansion of capitalism.

With communism fast becoming a dim memory (except in Cuba, at least until Castro's death, and at least rhetorically in China), capitalism has been freed of many

transpiring in capitalism. In Marx's terms, the proletariat is capable of achieving **class consciousness;** the capitalists are not.

Class consciousness is a prerequisite to revolution, but the coming revolution is aided by the dynamics of capitalism. For example, capitalism grows more and more competitive, prices are slashed, and an increasing number of capitalists are driven out of business and into the proletariat. Eventually, the proletariat swells while the capitalist class is reduced to a small number who maintain their position because of their skill at exploitation. When the massive

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class consciousness The ability of a class, in particular the proletariat, to overcome false consciousness and attain an accurate understanding of the capitalist system.

Contemporary Applications—Continued

of its global restraints and is rampaging through the world. This is most obvious in the former communist countries that have become prime territory for capitalist expansionism. Western capitalists have rushed into the old Soviet bloc and established a strong presence, while in China this has not only occurred, but so has the development of a strong indigenous capitalism. Indeed, the view now is not whether China will replace the United States as the leading capitalist country, but *when* that transformation will take place.

Marx foresaw the fact that capitalism not only would, but must, become a global phenomenon. Capitalist businesses now, much more than in Marx's day, must expand or die. Thus, they must ceaselessly seek out new markets as old markets grow less able to produce ever-expanding business and profits. Marx's prediction was prevented from coming to full fruition in the 20th century because of the global conflict between communism and capitalism (as well as other factors such as two devastating world wars). However, in the last two decades the global proliferation predicted by Marx has occurred with a vengeance.

What this all means is that Marx's ideas are more relevant today than ever before to the analysis of capitalism, especially global capitalism. In fact, some of the most important works in globalization these days emanate from a Marxian perspective (see Chapter 10). That is not to say that Marx's ideas are sacrosanct. Many of them are dubious, even downright wrong, and need to be amended, adapted, or abandoned by contemporary Marxian theorists. Indeed, that is what many of those thinkers are doing. Nonetheless, they take as their starting point Marx's theoretical ideas on capitalism and build on them to cast insight into the global success of capitalism in the wake of the failure of communism.

To answer the question that is the subtitle of this box: Marx's ideas are, if anything, *more* relevant today than ever!

proletariat finally achieve class consciousness and decide to act, there will be no contest because the small number of capitalists are likely to be easily brushed aside, perhaps with little or no violence.

Thus, capitalism will not be destroyed and communism will not be created without the proletariat taking action. In Marx's terms, the proletariat must engage in **praxis**, or concrete action. It is not enough to think about the evils of capitalism or develop great theories of it and its demise; people must take to the streets and make it happen. This does not necessarily mean that they must behave in violent ways, but it does mean they cannot sit back and wait for capitalism to collapse on its own.

praxis The idea that people, especially the proletariat, must take concrete action in order to overcome capitalism.

Communism

Marx had no doubt that the dynamics of capitalism would lead to such a revolution, but he devoted little time to describing the character of the communist society that would replace capitalism. To Marx, the priority was gaining an understanding of the way capitalism worked and communicating that understanding to the proletariat, thereby helping them gain class consciousness. He was critical of the many thinkers who spent their time daydreaming about some future utopian society. The immediate goal was the overthrow of the alienating and exploitative system. What was to come next would have to be dealt with once the revolution succeeded. Some say that this lack of a plan laid the groundwork for the debacles that took place in the Soviet Union and its satellites.

Marx did have some specific things to say about the future state of communism, but we get a better sense of communism by returning to his basic assumptions about human potential. In a sense, **communism** is *the* social system that permits, for the first time, the expression of full human potential. In effect, communism is an anti-system, a world in which the system is nothing more than the social relations among the people who comprise it. Marx did discuss a transitional phase from capitalism when there would be larger structures (e.g., the dictatorship of the proletariat), but that was to be short-lived and replaced by what he considered true communism. (The experience in the Soviet Union after the 1917 revolution indicates the naivete of this view and the fact that it may be impossible to eliminate the larger structures that exploit and alienate people.)

Thus, communism is a system that permits people to express the thoughtfulness, creativity, and sociability that have always been a possibility but inhibited or destroyed by previous social systems (e.g., feudalism, capitalism). Communist society would utilize and expand upon the technological and organizational innovations of capitalism, but otherwise get out of people's way and allow them to be what they always could have been, at least potentially.

MAX WEBER: THE RATIONALIZATION OF SOCIETY

If Karl Marx is the most important thinker from the point of view of social thought in general, as well as from the perspective of political developments of the last 100-plus years, then his fellow German theorist, Max Weber (1864–1920), is arguably (the other possibility is Emile Durkheim) the most important theorist from the perspective of sociology. Weber was a very complex thinker who made many contributions to social thought, but his best-known contribution is his theory of the increasing rationalization of the West. That theory is based on Weber's work on action, especially rational action.

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communism The social system that permits, for the first time, the expression of full human potential.

Social Action

For many years Max Weber's work on social action was the center of attention rather than his theory of rationalization, which is now seen as the heart of his theoretical orientation. This is traceable to the work of Talcott Parsons, who, in the 1930s, introduced classical European theory in general, and Weberian theory in particular, to a large American audience. However, he did so with a number of now widely recognized biases. One of those biases was his own action theory, which led him to accentuate the importance of Weber's thinking on action (which played a central role in the creation of Parsons's own perspective).

Behavior and Action

Weber's thinking on action is based on an important distinction in all sociologies of everyday life (see Chapter 6) between behavior and action. Both involve what people do on an everyday basis. However, **behavior** occurs with little or no thought, while **action** is the result of conscious processes. Behavior is closely tied to an approach, largely associated with psychology, known as **behaviorism**, which has played an important role in the development of many sociologies of everyday life. It focuses on situations where a stimulus is applied and a behavior results, more or less mechanically, with little or no thought processes intervening between stimulus and response. For example, you engage in behavior when you pull your hand away from a hot stove or automatically put up your umbrella when it starts raining.

Weber was *not* concerned with such behavior; his focus was on action in which thought intervened between stimulus and response. In other words, Weber was interested in situations in which people attach meaning to what they do: what they do is meaningful to them. In contrast, behavior is meaningless, at least in the sense that people simply do it without giving it much or any thought. Weber defined sociology as the study of action in terms of its subjective meaning. What matters are peoples' conscious processes. Furthermore, what people believe about a situation is more important in understanding the actions they take than the objective situation in which they find themselves.

At a theoretical level Weber was interested in the action of a single individual, but he was far more interested in the actions of two or more individuals. Sociology was to devote most of its attention to the regularities in the action of two or more individuals. In fact, Weber talked about collectivities (e.g., Calvinists, capitalists), while he argued that such collectivities must be treated solely as the result of the actions of two or more people. Only people can act and thus sociology must focus on actors, not collectivities. Sociologists' talk about collectivities is only for convenience sake. A collectivity is nothing more than a set of individual actors and actions.

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behavior Things that people do that require little or no thought.

action Things that people do that are the result of conscious processes.

behaviorism The study, largely associated with psychology, of behavior.

Max Weber (1864–1920)

A Biographical Vignette

Max Weber was born in Erfurt, Germany, on April 21, 1864, into a decidedly middle-class family. Important differences between his parents had a profound effect upon both his intellectual orientation and his psychological development. His father was a bureaucrat who rose to a relatively important political position. He was clearly a part of the political establishment and as a result eschewed any activity or idealism that would require personal sacrifice or threaten his position within the system.

In addition, the senior Weber was a man who enjoyed earthly pleasures, and in this and many other ways he stood in sharp contrast to his wife. Max Weber's mother was a devout Calvinist, a woman who sought to lead an ascetic life largely devoid of the pleasures craved by her husband. Her concerns were more otherworldly; she was disturbed by the imperfections that were signs that she was not destined for salvation. These deep differences between the parents led to marital tension, and both the differences and the tension had an immense impact on Weber.

Because it was impossible to emulate both parents, Weber was presented with a clear choice as a child. He first seemed to opt for his father's orientation to life, but later he drew closer to his mother's approach. Whatever the choice, the tension produced by the need to choose between such polar opposites negatively affected Max Weber's psyche.

During his eight years at the University of Berlin (where he obtained his doctorate and became a lawyer), Weber was financially dependent on his father, a circumstance he progressively grew to dislike. At the same time, he moved closer to his mother's values and his antipathy to his father increased. He adopted an ascetic way of life and plunged deeply into his work. During one semester as a student, his work habits were described as follows: "He continues the rigid work discipline, regulates his life by the clock, divides the daily routine into exact sections for the various subjects, saves in his way, by feeding himself evenings in his room with a pound of raw chopped beef and four fried eggs." Weber, emulating his mother, had become ascetic and diligent, a compulsive worker—in contemporary terms, a *workaholic.*

This compulsion for work led him in 1896 to a position as professor of economics at Heidelberg University. But in 1897, when Weber's academic career was blossoming, his father died following a violent argument between them. Soon after, Weber began to manifest symptoms that culminated in a nervous breakdown. Often unable to sleep or to work, Weber spent the next six or seven years in near-total collapse. After a long hiatus, some of his powers began to return in 1903, but it was not until 1904, when he delivered (in the United States) his first lecture in six and a half years, that Weber was able to begin to return to active academic life. In 1904 and 1905, he published one of his best-known works, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* In this work, Weber announced the ascendance, on an academic level, of his mother's religiosity. Weber devoted much of his time to the study of religion, though he was not personally religious.

Types of Action

Weber offered a now-famous distinction among four types of action. **Affectual action** (which was of little concern to Weber) is action that is the result of emotion; it is nonrational. Thus, slapping your child (or an aged parent) in a blind rage is an example of affectual action. Also nonrational is **traditional action,** in which what is done is based on the ways things have been done habitually or customarily. Crossing oneself in church is an example of traditional action. Although traditional action was of some interest to Weber (especially given its relationship to traditional authority discussed later in this chapter), he was far more interested, because of his overriding concern with rationalization, in the other two types of action, both of which are rational.

Value-rational action occurs when an actor's choice of the best means to an end is chosen on the basis of the actor's belief in some larger set of values. This may not be the optimal choice, but it is rational from the point of view of the value system in which the actor finds herself. So, if you belonged to a cult that believed in a ritual purging of one's previous meal before eating the next meal, that is what you would do, even though purging would be quite uncomfortable and delay, if not ruin, your next meal. Such action would be rational from the point of view of the value system of the cult.

Means-ends rational action involves the pursuit of ends that the actor has chosen for himself; thus, his action is not guided by some larger value system. It is, however, affected by the actor's view of the environment in which he finds himself, including the behavior of people and objects in it. This means that actors must take into account the nature of their situation when choosing the best means to an end. Thus, when you are at a party and spot someone you want to dance with, you must decide on the best way to meet that person, given the nature of the situation (it may be an all-couple party), objects (there may be a table in your path), and other people (one of whom may already be dancing with that person). Taking those things into consideration, you choose the best means of achieving your end of getting that dance.

These four types of actions are ideal types (see below). The fact is that one rarely if ever finds action that is solely within one of these four types. Rather, any given action is likely to be some combination of two or more of these ideal-typical actions.

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affectual action Nonrational action that is the result of emotion.

traditional action Action taken on the basis of the ways things have been done habitually or customarily.

value-rational action Action that occurs when an actor's choice of the best means to an end is chosen on the basis of the actor's belief in some larger set of values. This may not be the optimal choice, but it is rational from the point of view of the value system in which the actor finds herself.

means-ends rational action The pursuit of ends that the actor has chosen for himself; that choice is affected by the actor's view of the environment in which she finds herself, including the behavior of people and objects in it.

Weber offers an approach to studying social action and the theoretical tools to study such action. Many sociologists have found this work quite useful.

Types of Rationality

While Weber's theory of action relies on the typology of action outlined above, his larger theory of rationalization rests on the typology of rationality to be outlined below. (As you will see, the two typologies overlap to some degree.)

Practical rationality is the type that we all practice on a daily basis in getting from one point to another. Given the realities of the circumstances we face, we try to deal with whatever difficulties exist and to find the most expedient way of attaining our goal. For example, our usual route to the university is blocked by a traffic accident, so we take a side road and work our way to campus using a series of back roads. People in the West are not the only ones who engage in practical rationality; all people in all societies throughout history have utilized this type of rationality.

Theoretical rationality involves an effort to master reality cognitively through the development of increasingly abstract concepts. Here the goal is to attain a rational understanding of the world rather than taking rational action within it. Thus, to continue with the example discussed above, an example of theoretical rationality as applied to traffic problems would involve the efforts of experts in the area to figure out long-term solutions to traffic bottlenecks. Like practical rationality, cognitive rationality has occurred everywhere in the world throughout history.

Substantive rationality, like practical rationality, involves action directly. Here the choice of the most expedient thing to do is guided by larger values rather than by daily experiences and practical thinking. Thus, for example, if one's tribe says that before hunting for food, one must bury a spear under a mound, then that is what one does. From the point of view of practical rationality, taking time to bury a spear is clearly not rational, but it is rational within the value system of the tribe. This means that what takes place within one tribe (or value system) is no more or less rational than what takes place in another. Thus, if in one tribe you bury a spear before hunting and in another you engage in ritual bathing, each is rational within its particular context. As with the preceding two types of rationality, substantive rationality occurs transcivilizationally and transhistorically.

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practical rationality On a day-to-day basis, we deal with whatever difficulties exist and find the most expedient way of attaining our goal of getting from one point to another.

theoretical rationality An effort to master reality cognitively through the development of increasingly abstract concepts. The goal is to attain a rational understanding of the world rather than to take rational action within it.

substantive rationality The choice of the most expedient action is guided by larger values rather than by daily experiences and practical thinking.

Finally, and most importantly to Weber, is **formal rationality,** in which the choice of the most expedient action is based on rules, regulations, and laws that apply to everyone. The classic case of this is modern bureaucracy, in which the rules of the organization dictate what is the most rational course of action. Thus, if the rules say that every action must be preceded by filling out a required form in triplicate, then that is what everyone must do. To some outside the organization this may seem inefficient and irrational, but it is rational within the context of the bureaucracy. Unlike the other types of rationality, formal rationality arose only in the Western world with the coming of industrialization.

Thus, what interested Weber was formal rationality and why it arose only in the modern West and not anywhere else at any other time. This led him to a concern for what factors expedited the development of rationalization (formal) in the West and what barriers existed to it elsewhere. Major expediting forces and barriers exist in religion.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

In the West, Protestantism played a key role in the rise of rationalization. In this case, Weber was primarily interested in the rationalization of the economic system, and the most rational economic system is capitalism. Weber considered capitalism to be rational in a number of ways, but most importantly because of its emphasis on quantifying things, which is best represented by its development and reliance on modern bookkeeping. Thus, Weber was interested in the expediting role that Protestantism (especially the sect known as Calvinism) played in the rise of capitalism. On the other hand, other religions throughout the world (Confucianism in China, Hinduism in India) served to impede the rise of rationalization in general, and capitalism in particular, in those nations.

Weber was primarily interested in the **Protestant ethic** as it existed in Calvinism. Calvinists believed in predestination; that is, whether they were going to heaven or hell was predetermined. There was no way they could directly affect their fate. However, it was possible for them to discern signs that they were either saved or damned, and one of the major signs of salvation was success in business. Thus, the Calvinists were deeply interested in being successful in business, which meant building bigger and more profitable businesses. It also meant that instead of spending profits on frivolous personal pleasures, they had to save money and reinvest it in the business in order to make it even more successful. They were comforted in their sometimes ruthless pursuit of

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formal rationality The choice of the most expedient action is based on rules, regulations, and laws that apply to everyone. This form of rationality is distinctive to the modern West.

Protestant ethic Because of their belief in predestination, the Calvinists could not know whether they were going to heaven or hell or directly affect their fate. However, it was possible for them to discern signs that they were either saved or damned, and one of the major signs of salvation was success in business.

Key Concept
Verstehen

Verstehen is a German word meaning understanding. From the point of view of action theory, ***verstehen*** means trying to understand the thought processes of the actor, the actor's meanings and motives, and how these factors led to the action (or interaction) under study.

Weber made clear that it was not a softer, or less scientific, method than, for example, the experimental methods employed by the behaviorist. To Weber, *verstehen* was not simply intuition, but involved a systematic and rigorous method for studying thoughts and actions. In fact, a researcher using *verstehen* has an advantage over someone who fancies herself a hard-nosed scientist using positivistic methods. The advantage lies in the fact that because subjects are fellow human beings, the social scientist can gain an understanding of what goes on in the subjects' minds and why they do what they do. A physicist studying subatomic particles has no chance of understanding those particles; in fact, the particles cannot be understood in the same way that human beings can be understood. They can only be observed from without, while thought and action can be observed from within, introspectively.

But how does this methodology, this sense of understanding actors and actions, relate to Weber's grand theory of, for example, the relationship between Calvinism and the spirit of capitalism? It could be argued (and there is some merit in it) that Weber was trying to understand what went on in the minds of individual Calvinists that led them to the kinds of actions that set the stage for the rise of the spirit of capitalism. However, another view on this is that Weber used *verstehen* as a method to put himself in the place of individual Calvinists in order to understand the cultural context in which they lived and what led them to behave in a capitalist manner (i.e., energetically seeking profits). Here the view of the researcher is outward to examine the cultural context rather than inward to examine the mental processes of the Calvinist. A third view is that *verstehen* is concerned with the relationship between individual mental processes and the larger cultural context. In fact, all three approaches have ample support. However, one valid interpretation is that *verstehen* is a method to analyze action from the perspective of individual mental processes.

profits by the fact that it was their ethical duty to behave in such a way. They were also provided with hard-working, conscientious workers who were similarly motivated in looking for signs of success, and being a good worker was one such sign. Finally, Calvinist businessmen did not have to agonize over the fact that they were so successful while those who worked for them were so much less successful. After all, all of this was preordained. If they weren't among the saved, they wouldn't be successful. And, if at least some of their

verstehen A methodological technique involving an effort to understand the thought processes of the actor, the actor's meanings and motives, and how these factors led to the action (or interaction) under study.

employees were saved, they would prosper economically. It was a wonderfully reassuring system to those who sought and acquired wealth.

All of these beliefs about economic success among the Calvinists (and other sects) added up to the Protestant ethic. And this Weber linked to the development of another system of ideas, the **spirit of capitalism.** It was this idea system that led, in the end, to the capitalist economic system. People had been motivated to be economically successful at other times and in other parts of the world, but the difference at this time in the West was that they were not motivated by greed, but by an ethical system that emphasized economic success. The pursuit of profit was turned away from the morally suspect greed and toward a spirit that was deemed to be highly moral.

The spirit of capitalism had a number of components, including, most importantly for our purposes, the seeking of profits rationally and systematically. Other ideas associated with this spirit included frugality, punctuality, fairness, and the earning of money as a legitimate end in itself. Above all, it was people's duty to ceaselessly increase their wealth and economic prosperity. The spirit of capitalism was removed from the realm of individual ambition and made an ethical imperative.

There is a clear affinity between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; the former helped give rise to the latter. Evidence for this was found by Weber in an examination of those European nations in which several religions coexisted. What Weber found was that the leaders of the economic system in these nations—business leaders, owners of capital, high-grade skilled labor, and more advanced technically and commercially trained personnel—were overwhelmingly Protestant. This was taken to mean that Protestantism was a significant cause in the choice of these occupations and, conversely, that other religions (for example, Roman Catholicism) failed to produce idea systems that impelled people into these vocations. In other words, Roman Catholicism did not give, and could not have given, birth to the spirit of capitalism. In fact, Roman Catholicism impeded the development of such a spirit. In this, it functioned in the West the way Confucianism and Buddhism functioned in the East.

Confucianism, Hinduism, and Capitalism

China, like the West, had the prerequisites for the development of capitalism, including a tradition of intense acquisitiveness and unscrupulous competition. There was great industry and enormous capacity for work among the Chinese. With these and other factors in its favor, why didn't China undergo rationalization in general, and more specifically why didn't capitalism develop there?

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spirit of capitalism In the West, unlike any other area of the world, people were motivated to be economically successful, not by greed, but by an ethical system that emphasized the ceaseless pursuit of economic success. The spirit of capitalism had a number of components including the seeking of profits rationally and systematically, frugality, punctuality, fairness, and the earning of money as a legitimate end in itself.

Although elements of capitalism were there (moneylenders, businesspeople who sought high profits), China lacked a market and other rational elements of capitalism. There were a number of reasons for the failure to develop capitalism in China, but chief among them was Confucianism and its characteristics.

Confucianism emphasized a literary education as a prerequisite to obtaining an office and acquiring status. A cultured man well-steeped in literature was valued. Also valued was the ability to be clever and witty. The Confucians devalued any kind of work and delegated it to subordinates. Although the Confucians valued wealth, it was not regarded as proper to work for it. Confucians were unconcerned with the economy and economic activities. Active engagement in a for-profit enterprise was viewed as morally dubious and unbecoming a Confucian gentleman. Furthermore, Confucians were not oriented to any kind of change, including economic change. The goal of the Confucian was to maintain the status quo. Perhaps most importantly, there was no tension between the religion of the Confucian and the world in which they lived. Therefore, they did not need to take any action to resolve it. This stands in contrast to Calvinism in which a tension between predestination and the desire to know one's fate led to the idea that success in business might be a sign of salvation and a resolution of the tension.

Hinduism in India also posed barriers to rationalization and capitalism. For example, the Hindu believed that people were born into the caste (a fixed position within a system of social stratification) that they deserved to be in by virtue of behavior in a past life. Through faithful adherence to the ritual of caste, the Hindu gains merit for the next life. Salvation was to be achieved by faithfully following the rules. Innovation, particularly in the economic sphere, could not lead to a higher caste in the next life. Activity in this world was not seen as important, because this world was merely a transient abode and an impediment to the spiritual quest of the Hindu.

Authority Structures and Rationalization

The theme of rationalization runs through many other aspects of Weber's work. Let us examine it in one other domain—authority structures. Authority is legitimate domination. The issue is: What makes it legitimate for some people to issue commands that other people are likely to obey? The three bases of authority are tradition, charisma, and rational legal. In keeping with his theory of rationalization, Weber foresaw a long-term trend in the direction of the triumph of rational-legal authority.

Traditional authority is based on the belief by followers that certain people (based on their family, or tribe, or lineage) have exercised authority since

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traditional authority Authority based on the belief by followers that certain people (based on their family, tribe, or lineage) have exercised sovereignty since time immemorial. The leaders claim, and the followers believe in, the sanctity of age-old rules and powers.

time immemorial. The leaders claim, and the followers believe in, the sanctity of age-old rules and powers. Various forms of traditional authority include rule by elders, rule by leaders who inherit their positions, and so on. Weber viewed feudalism as one type of traditional authority. Traditional authority structures are not rational and they impede the rationalization process. Although one still finds vestiges of traditional authority in the world today, especially in less-developed societies, it has largely disappeared or become marginalized. For example, the monarchy in England is a vestige of traditional authority, but it clearly has no power.

Charismatic authority is legitimated by a belief by the followers in the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of the charismatic leader. This idea obviously involves the now-famous concept of **charisma.** Although in everyday usage we now emphasize the extraordinary qualities of a person, Weber emphasized the fact that others define a person as having charisma. This leads to the important conclusion that a person need *not* have any discernible extraordinary qualities in order to be defined as a charismatic leader. To Weber, charisma is an extremely important revolutionary force. Throughout history charismatic leaders have come to the fore and overthrown traditional (and even rational-legal) authority structures.

However, it is important to remember that charismatic authority is *not* rational and therefore is ill suited to the day-to-day demands of administering a society. In fact, this becomes obvious almost immediately to the followers of a victorious charismatic leader. Soon after taking power they take steps to make their regime better able to handle the routine tasks of administering a domain. They do this through a process Weber labeled the **routinization of charisma.** In other words, they seek to recast the extraordinary and revolutionary characteristics of their regime so that it is able to handle mundane matters. They also do this in order to prepare for the day when the charismatic leader passes from the scene. If they did not take these steps, they would be out of power as soon as the leader died. However, through routinization they hope to transfer the charisma to a disciple or to the administrative organization formed by the group of disciples.

There is a terrible contradiction here. In attempting to make charisma routine, the disciples are doing what is needed to allow this form of authority to function on a daily basis and to continue in existence after the leader dies, but, if successful, they would undermine the very basis of charismatic authority—it

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charismatic authority Authority legitimated by a belief by the followers in the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of the charismatic leader.

charisma The definition by others that a person has extraordinary qualities. A person need not actually have such qualities in order to be so defined.

routinization of charisma Efforts by disciples to recast the extraordinary and revolutionary characteristics of the charismatic leader so that they are better able to handle mundane matters. This is also done in order to prepare for the day when the charismatic leader passes from the scene and to allow the disciples to remain in power.

Key Concept

The Ideal Type and the Ideal-Typical Bureaucracy

Weber created many important methodological ideas, but one of the most important is the **ideal type.** It is important to point out immediately that Weber did *not* mean that an ideal type is some sort of utopian, or best possible, phenomenon. It is ideal because it is a one-sided exaggeration, usually an exaggeration of the rationality of a given phenomenon. Such one-sided exaggerations become concepts that Weber used to analyze the social world in all its historical and contemporary variation. The ideal type is a measuring rod to be used in comparing various specific examples of a social phenomenon either cross-culturally or over time.

One of Weber's most famous ideal types is the **bureaucracy.** The ideal-typical bureaucracy has the following characteristics:

1. A series of official functions become offices in which the behavior of those who occupy those positions is bound by rules.
2. Each office has a specified sphere of competence.
3. Each office has obligations to perform specific functions, the authority to carry them out, and the means of compulsion to get the job done.
4. The offices are organized into a hierarchical system.
5. People need technical training in order to meet the technical qualifications for each office.
6. Those who occupy these positions are given the things they need to do the job; they do not own them.

would no longer be extraordinary or perceived by the followers in that way Thus, if successful, the routinization of charisma eventually destroys charisma and the structure is en route to becoming one of Weber's other authority structures: traditional or rational-legal.

As we said, charismatic authority is a revolutionary force. It operates by changing people from within; they change their minds and opt to follow the

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ideal type A one-sided, exaggerated concept, usually an exaggeration of the rationality of a given phenomenon, used to analyze the social world in all its historical and contemporary variation. The ideal type is a measuring rod to be used in comparing various specific examples of a social phenomenon either cross-culturally or over time.

bureaucracy A modern type of organization in which the behavior of officers is rule bound; each office has a specified sphere of competence and has obligations to perform specific functions, the authority to carry them out, and the means of compulsion to get the job done; the offices are organized into a hierarchical system technical training is needed for each office; those things needed to do the job belong to the office and not the officer; the position is part of the organization and cannot be appropriated by an officer; and much of what goes on in the bureaucracy (acts decisions, rules) is in writing.

Key Concept—Continued

7. The position is part of the organization and cannot be appropriated by an incumbent.
8. Much of what goes on in the bureaucracy (acts, decisions, rules) is in writing.

This ideal type, like all ideal types, existed nowhere in its entirety. In creating it, Weber had in mind the bureaucracy created in the modern West, but even there no specific organization had all of these characteristics and to a high degree. But Weber used this ideal type (and every ideal type) to do historical-comparative analysis, in this case, analysis of organizational forms. He did this in terms of the organizations associated with the three types of authority and found that the organizational forms associated with traditional and charismatic authority are lacking most or all of these characteristics; they are not bureaucracies and they do not function nearly as well as the bureaucratic organizations associated with rational-legal authority.

One could also use the ideal type to compare specific organizations within the modern world in terms of the degree to which they measure up to the ideal type. The researcher would use the ideal type to pinpoint divergences from the ideal type and then seek to explain them. Among the reasons why a specific organization does not measure up to the ideal type might be misinformation, strategic errors, logical fallacies, emotional factors, or, more generally, any irrationality that enters into the operation of the organization.

charismatic leader. Although charisma is an important revolutionary force, it pales in comparison to what Weber considered the most important revolutionary force in history—rationalization and the coming of **rational-legal authority.** The legitimacy of leaders in rational-legal authority comes from the fact that there is a series of codified rules and regulations, and leaders hold their positions as a result of those rules. Thus, for example, the president of the United States is an example of rational-legal authority, and his leadership is legitimized by the fact that he is the person who won the election, who got the most votes in the electoral college.

Although charisma changes peoples' minds—it changes them from within; rationalization changes people from without—it alters the structures in which they live. And the key structure associated with rational-legal authority is the modern bureaucracy (see the Key Concept box on the ideal type). The other forms of authority have organizations associated with them, but they do not measure up to bureaucracy and do not have nearly the effect on people that

rational-legal authority A type of authority in which the legitimacy of leaders is derived from the fact that there is a series of codified rules and regulations, and leaders hold their positions as a result of those rules.

bureaucracy does. Bureaucracy was so important to Weber that for him it was not only the heart of rational-legal authority, but *the* model for the rationalization process in the West. Bureaucracy was seen by Weber not only as a rational structure, but a powerful one that exercises great control over those who work within it and are even served by it. It is a kind of cage that alters the way people think and act.

More generally, Weber thought of rationalization as having cage-like qualities. There is no question that rationalization in general and rational-legal authority (and its bureaucracy) in particular bring with them numerous advantages, but Weber was very attuned to the problems associated with them. In fact, Weber was closely associated with the notion of an iron cage of rationalization—the imagery of a powerful, cage-like structure from which it is nearly impossible to escape. That was the way Weber thought of the increasing rationalization of the West. He appreciated the advances but despaired of its increasingly tight control over people. He feared that as more and more sectors of society (not just the government bureaucracy) were rationalized, people would find it increasingly difficult to escape into nonrationalized sectors of life. They would find themselves locked into an iron cage of rationalization.

Weber not only viewed rationalization as triumphant in the West, but also viewed rational-legal authority in the same way. Rational-legal authority is much more effective than traditional authority, with the result that the latter must, over time, give way to the former. Charismatic revolutions will continue to occur, but once routinized, the organization of charismatic authority is weak in comparison to the rational bureaucracy. In any case, once routinized, charisma is destroyed and the authority structure is en route to some other form. Although the new form could be traditional authority, in the modern West it is increasingly likely that charismatic authority is transformed into rational-legal authority. Furthermore, as modern charismatic movements arise, they are increasingly likely to face the iron cage of rationalization and rational-legal authority. That cage not only locks people in, but it also is increasingly impervious to external assault; it is increasingly able to keep both the charismatic leader and the rabble that follows such a leader out. The result is that in the modern world charismatic authority, as well as traditional authority, becomes increasingly inappropriate to the demands of modern society and increasingly unlikely to accede to power. Rational-legal authority, rationalization, and the iron cage of rationality are triumphant!

Summary

1. The great theories of sociology's classical age were vast, highly ambitious theoretical efforts to tell the story of great stretches of social history.
2. Emile Durkheim's theory deals with the changing division of labor and the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity.
3. The major factor in this transformation is changes in dynamic density.
4. The change from mechanical to organic solidarity is accompanied by a dramatic decline in the power of the collective conscience.

5. An indicator of that change is the transformation from the predominance of repressive to restitutive law.
6. The major pathology associated with organic solidarity and its weak collective conscience is anomie.
7. Karl Marx's theory deals with the historical roots of capitalism, capitalism itself, and the hoped-for transition to communism.
8. Marx's critique of capitalism is based on a series of assumptions about human potential. That potential is thwarted in capitalism, leading to alienation, especially among the workers.
9. Capitalism is essentially a two-class economic system in which one class (the capitalists) own the means of production and the other class (the proletariat) must sell its labor-time in order to have access to those means.
10. Marx adopts the labor theory of value—all value comes from labor—and this allows him to see that capitalists exploit the proletariat.
11. The proletariat (and the capitalists) are unable to see this reality because of false consciousness, but they are eventually capable of getting a clear picture of the way capitalism works and of achieving class consciousness.
12. To overthrow capitalism the proletariat must engage in praxis.
13. Communism is a social system that permits for the first time the full expression of human potential.
14. Max Weber distinguished among four types of rationality—practical, theoretical, substantive, and formal—but his focus was on formal rationality and the way its preeminence led to the rationalization of the West.
15. The Protestant ethic played a central role in the rationalization of the West, especially the economy. It was a key factor in the development of the spirit of capitalism and ultimately the rise of the capitalist economic system.
16. Weber was interested in the factors within Confucianism in China and Hinduism in India that prevented rationalization and capitalism.
17. Weber was concerned with the three types of authority—traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal—and the emergence of the latter as the dominant form of authority.

Suggested Readings

STEVEN LUKES *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work.* New York: Harper and Row, 1972. The best single book on the life and work of Emile Durkheim.

ANTHONY GIDDENS, ed. *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972. A nice selection of excerpts from most of Durkheim's important works.

ROBERT ALUN JONES "Emile Durkheim." In George Ritzer, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists.* Malden, MA, and Oxford, England: Blackwell, 2000, pp. 205–250. Good coverage of Durkheim and his work with a number of unique contributions, including insights into the social and intellectual context of his work.

MUSTAFA EMIRBAYER, ed. *Emile Durkheim: Sociologist of Modernity.* Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003. A useful collection of some of Durkheim's most important work as well as more contemporary works that pick up on key themes in his work.

DAVID MCLELLAN *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought.* New York: Harper Colophon, 1973. A monumental treatment of Marx's life and work.

DAVID MCLELLAN, ed. *The Thought of Karl Marx.* New York: Harper Torchbooks. A useful compendium of excerpts from the most important of Marx's works.